

TEACHING TOLKIEN: LANGUAGE, SCHOLARSHIP, AND CREATIVITY

ADAM KOTLARCZYK

Why Tolkien?

Let us start with the obvious—if cynical—question, almost certain to come from a skeptical administrator or colleague: why would any serious, self-respecting English teacher want to teach an author whose work is about dragons, fairies, and the fantastic? With all the increased attention to standardized testing and with the demand for rigor in readings in the average English curriculum, choosing a popular text might raise eyebrows among critics. The question that an English teacher may be asked (or indeed, may ask him- or herself) is: doesn't teaching Tolkien as "serious" literature just fan those flames?

The short answer is no.

J. R. R. Tolkien was an English teacher's English teacher. Success as a fiction writer came much later—he was in his

mid-forties when *The Hobbit* was published in 1937, and in his early sixties when *The Lord of the Rings* went to press in 1954. First, he served as a professor of English at the University of Leeds, and later as the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford. His first professional published book—fifteen years before *The Hobbit*—had the decidedly unfantastic title, *A Middle English Vocabulary*. He worked on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for heaven's sake. In an anecdote to which any English teacher can relate, Tolkien even told the BBC in an interview that he began *The Hobbit*, the text that caused people to take notice of him as a fiction writer instead of a professor and philologist, as a scribble while grading essay exams:

I'd got an enormous pile of examinations there [pointing to his right], and marking school examinations in the summertime is an enormous [task], very laborious and unfortunately also very boring. I remember picking up a paper and actually finding—I nearly gave it an extra mark on it, an extra five marks—one page of the particular paper was left blank. Glorious. Nothing to read, so I scribbled on it, I can't think why, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." (qtd. in Anderson 11)

Even if Tolkien had never written his books about Middle-Earth, though, there's a good chance many English teachers would know his name. His published lecture "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" was transformational in the study of that poem, and was singled out by Seamus Heaney as "epoch-making" in the introduction to his landmark 2000 translation: "Tolkien's brilliant literary treatment changed the way the poem was valued and initiated a new era—and new terms—of appreciation" (xi).

So he taught and loved language and he was an esteemed essayist. What more could an English teacher want? Oh, right—creative writing. With Tolkien, the creative aspect is self-evident: *The Hobbit* and the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* have been in print for over seventy years, with combined sales approaching 200 million (Shippey xxiv). Peter Jackson's film adaptations have grossed over one billion dollars worldwide.

But, your persistent administrator might argue, dragons don't belong in the realm of "serious" literature. Think again. In his book *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, Professor Tom Shippey makes a compelling argument that the "dominant literary mode of the twentieth century has been the fantastic" (vii). Shippey cites texts and authors already widely accepted in curricula, appearing on syllabi and even AP exams, as proof: Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, and Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*, for example. In truth, fantasy and the fantastic have been part of literature for much longer, from H. G. Wells to Jules Verne, from Shelley to Malory to Spenser to the *Beowulf* poet. As Tolkien himself said of *Beowulf* in his lecture, the appeal of the fantastic may be that it transcends the limitations and the petty politics of the real, for "it glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts; it stands amid but above the petty wars of princes, and surpasses the dates and limits of historical periods, however important."

Studies of Tolkien are on the rise in high schools and colleges across the country—not just integrating Tolkien into the curriculum, but entire courses devoted to his writing. A quick Internet search reveals courses like the "Tolkien Seminar" at Saint John's College High School (DC), "*The Hobbit*" at the San Juan Unified School District (CA), "Tolkien and Literary Heroism" at Franklin Delano Roosevelt High School (NY),

"English: *The Hobbit*" at the University of Vermont, "*Lord of the Rings* and Medieval Heroic Poetry" at Southern Illinois University–Edwardsville, "J. R. R. Tolkien" at Wheaton College (MA), and "Tolkien: Medieval and Modern" at the University of Chicago. To this list, I myself recently added "J. R. R. Tolkien: Language and Literature" at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy.

I am an unlikely advocate for Tolkien's work as English and literary study. My primary interest has been in American literature, with a strong preference for the realists and modernists of the early twentieth century. I generally don't care for fantasy, and I—to the everlasting shock, horror, and disappointment of my students (also: some colleagues and my wife)—have never even been able to finish a Harry Potter book. Yet for the reasons outlined above and to be detailed hereafter, I believe the time has never been better for Tolkien to play a bigger part in the English classroom. His writing and career serve as a model for what the teaching and learning of English should be about—language, analysis, and creativity.

Language

Language seems to me by far the most underutilized aspect of studying and teaching Tolkien's writing, and with good reason. Unless you have some background in Old English, it can be a very daunting task. It is, however, also one of the richest and most rewarding aspects of studying Tolkien, and one that students quickly learn to appreciate. In anonymous end-of-year surveys of the course I taught, students repeatedly commented on how much they'd learned about language in their Tolkien course. "I've seen connections between Old English and Modern English and see how language can be used as a device to demonstrate culture," wrote one student; another commented: "This class has taught me

more about the fundamentals of language than probably all my previous English and French classes together.”

Fortunately, one needn't have a PhD in medieval studies to demonstrate effectively the influence of Tolkien's love of language on his texts (although it helps if one knows someone who does, and for her assistance in this area I am indebted to Susan Deskis at Northern Illinois University). For those who have the background—or who are brave enough to learn—some fundamentals of Old English (also called Anglo-Saxon) can really go a long way. In my classroom, although we did some short translations, it was more important to learn *how* the language works than to learn the language through rote memorization—a subtle distinction, perhaps, but one that takes a lot of pressure off students (and their teacher). To that end, we discussed the basics of pronunciation, conjugation, and declension. With a little coaching, students can learn to read and pronounce Old English aloud in a class period. There are a number of YouTube videos that teach the basics of pronunciation, along with videos that model pronunciation by reading poems aloud as the text is scanned on the screen.

Once they can pronounce the words, students can perform some simple translation activities from Tolkien's writing. Using any number of online Old English-to-modern English glossaries, students can start to peel back the many layers of Tolkien's Middle-Earth. This is especially true in Rohan. Consider Rohan's King Théoden. In Old English, the word *þeoden* (*þ* is usually pronounced “th”) means king, lord, or leader (compelling one incredulous student to ask, “His name is King King?”). Likewise, Théoden's father Thengel (*þengel* = prince), niece Éowyn (from *eoh* = horse and *wyn* = joy), and hall, Meduseld (*meduseld* = mead hall). Even his allies, the ents (*ent* = giant) and his enemy, Saruman (*saru* or *searu*

= cunning/treacherous and *mann* = man) take their names from Old English (Tolley).

Tolkien, more than perhaps any author, uses names of people and places to conjure meaning; he believed ancient words had an almost archetypal resonance in the modern ear. As Shippey writes, Tolkien believed people “could detect historical strata in language without knowing how they did it,” and that “it was possible sometimes to feel one’s way back from words as they survived in later periods to concepts which had long since vanished” (xiv). Thus our study of language in Tolkien is not an exercise in itself merely, but a key to unlocking the dense cultural and literary allusions embedded in his work.

Old English (and often, Old Norse) becomes our bridge to these ancient allusions that enhance our understanding of Tolkien’s work. Tolkien “allude[s] perhaps more than most to ancient literatures [...] and to understand him presupposes a knowledge of this literature” (Tolley 60). The most significant of these allusions may be *Beowulf*; no class on Tolkien is complete without a reading (in translation, of course) of the poem. Not only in its themes (discussed later) is *Beowulf* similar to *Lord of the Rings*, but in places, specific descriptions seem parallel. For example, try having students read the arrival of Beowulf at Heorot (lines 224–490) next to the arrival of Aragorn, Gandalf, Gimli, and Legolas at Meduseld (Book III, Chapter 6), noting the similarities (discussed in-depth in Tolley). Contrast the greeting of a warden of Théoden, “Who are you that come heedless over the plain thus strangely clad, riding horses like to our own horses?” (497) with the Danish coastguard’s greeting to Beowulf: “What kind of men are you who arrive / rigged out for combat in coats of mail / sailing here over the sea-lanes / in your steep-hulled boat?” (237–240). A similar exercise might be done with the Old English poem “The Wanderer,” whose lament beginning

"Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago?" (92) translates to "Where is the horse gone? Where the rider?" and is echoed by Aragorn's (or, in Peter Jackson's film *The Two Towers*, Théoden's) chant, "*Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?*" (497).

It is not from Old English alone that a reader might discover added depth and meaning in Tolkien's writing. You might, for example, ask students to contrast the role and description of the eagles in *The Hobbit* with the "dream" portion of Geoffrey Chaucer's poem, "The House of Fame" (lines 529–553 and 896–909). Middle English is phonetically similar to modern English, so although the lines may look intimidating in Chaucer's original language, students reading them aloud should be able to "hear" and make sense of the meaning: "This egle, of which I have yow told, / That shoon with fethres as of gold, / Which that so hye gan to sore, / I gan beholde more and more."

Even in modern English, Tolkien loves to experiment with meaning and sometimes even to riddle out linguistic conundrums. Take "Ringwraith," for example. If you were to have your students look up "wraith" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (on which Tolkien worked, not coincidentally, in the 'W' volume (Gilliver)), they might find two competing examples from Gavin Douglas's Scots translation of *The Aeneid*: In the first, wraith represents someone who has died ("In diuers placis The wraith is walkis of goistis that are deyd"), but in the second, it represents the living ("Thidder went this wrath or schaddo of Ene [Aeneas]") (Shippey 123). Ask your students how Tolkien resolved this linguistic paradox, and they'll see that his solution is to create wraiths as creatures that are both living and dead—a fun way, perhaps, to begin to address Common Core State Standard 11-12.5B, "Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations."

Scholarship and Analysis

Another key and (sometimes) overlooked aspect of Tolkien's work is his scholarship. Even for high-achieving high school students (and, sometimes, even for their teachers), this reading can be dense and difficult, but it is rewarding and provides much insight into Tolkien's fiction, as well as some fascinating fodder for discussion. If you're thinking about the Common Core, it is also a unique way to handle complex informational texts. I have found that challenging students with Tolkien's essays can push students in their own thinking and analytical writing by modeling what good writing can look like. In teaching a Tolkien course, I also found that after reading his creative work, many students were curious to see how he wrote in other modes. I point out to them that "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" is essentially one long, well-researched, beautiful analysis paper, and students can plumb it to demonstrate key elements of formal writing (thesis, support, opposing views, etc.) as readily as to uncover its ideas on the poem itself.

"*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" is so important to reading Tolkien because *Beowulf* was so influential on his work; through reading the lecture, we discover his own analysis of the poem and see how he applied its themes in his own writing. "Correct and sober taste may refuse to admit that there can be an interest for *us*—the proud *we* that includes all intelligent living people—in ogres and dragons," writes Tolkien in a passage that could as easily defend his own work as *Beowulf*. "[W]e then perceive its puzzlement in face of the odd fact that it has derived great pleasure from a poem that is actually about these unfashionable creatures" (112). This, in part, explains the appeal of myth—and perhaps his own mythic work—which Tolkien says "is alive at once and in all its parts, and dies before it can be dissected" by analysis.

"Monsters" can also be connected more directly to Tolkien's writing. After reading of Smaug in *The Hobbit* for example, students might grapple with the idea expressed in "Monsters" that the dragon in *Beowulf* is a "conception, none the less, [which] approaches *draconitas* rather than *draco*: a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and of the indiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or bad (the evil aspect of all life)." He is, as Tolkien writes, "not to be blamed for being a dragon, but rather for not being dragon enough" (114). Can this be said also of Smaug? To put it another way, if Smaug is the driving, symbolic evil of *The Hobbit*, why then does his death not diminish, but rather escalate, the violence around the Lonely Mountain, leading to the fragmentation of Bilbo and Thorin's party and the Battle of Five Armies?

Finally, "Monsters" describes a particular worldview pervasive in both *Beowulf* and Middle-Earth. As *Lord of the Rings* is about the ending of an era (the Third Age), so too is the *Beowulf* poet concerned with the idea that "man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die" (119). All cultures, Tolkien recognizes, even his own, will pass away. Yet *Lord of the Rings* and *Beowulf* are not concerned only with this passing; the ending is balanced with a beginning. Aragorn's coronation begins a new age, and as much as *Beowulf* tells the tale of the death of the hero, it also bespeaks his rise and maturation. Likewise, the loss, sadness, and pain of Frodo's retreat to the Havens in the book's final passage are counterbalanced by friendship and new family even in the moments immediately following his departure:

Merry and Pippin rode on to Buckland; and already they were singing again as they went. But Sam turned to Bywater, and so came back up the Hill, as day was ending once more. And he went on, and there was yellow

light, and fire within; and the evening meal was ready, and he was expected. And Rose drew him in, and set him in his chair, and put little Elanor upon his lap.

He drew a deep breath. "Well, I'm back," he said. (1008)

Here Tolkien contrasts endings and beginnings: the passing of Frodo and eventually his generation with the setting of the sun, but also the coming of Elanor's generation into a world made better by his heroic sacrifice. As Tolkien writes of *Beowulf*, "It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting" (124). Just as readers can feel sorrow in Middle-Earth or *Beowulf* for "a day already changing and passing, a time that has now forever vanished, swallowed in oblivion" (129), so too can they welcome the dawning of a new time, even though that time, too, is fated to pass eventually—or as Tolkien puts it at the end of the essay, "until the dragon comes" (130).

This interest in paradox also plays a major role in one of Tolkien's other lectures worth sharing, in whole or in part, with a class: "On Fairy-Stories" (1939), essentially his theory and philosophy of myth and fantasy. More specifically, it applies to "eucatastrophe," a neologism that combines the Greek prefix for "good," *eu-*, with "catastrophe." Tolkien calls eucatastrophe "the peculiar quality of the 'joy' in successful Fantasy [...] explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth" (155). Students might try to connect this idea to Tolkien's fiction writing; where is the eucatastrophic moment? In a letter to his son, Christopher, Tolkien claimed it for *The Hobbit* and the (unfinished, at this point) *Lord of the Rings*:

I knew I had written a story of worth in 'The Hobbit' when reading it (after it was old enough to be detached from me) I had suddenly in fairly strong measure the

'eucatastrophic' emotion at Bilbo's exclamation: "The Eagles! The Eagles are coming!" And in the last chapter of *The Ring* that I have yet written I hope you'll note, when you receive it (it'll soon be on its way) that Frodo's face goes livid and convinces Sam that he's dead, just when Sam give up *hope*. (Letter 89)

Creativity

I've saved the briefest section for last because with the teaching of Tolkien it should be the most obvious. A serious study of Tolkien requires that we help our students inquire into language—our modern version as well as its forebears. It also requires that we ask our students to read his analytical work, and that they think and write analytically. But equally important to these things is the act of *creation*—or, as Tolkien might have called it in "Fairy-Stories," "sub-creation." Ralph Waldo Emerson writes that "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end, which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire." Tolkien's books then should not just be studied, but should inspire your students to their own creations, just as Tolkien was inspired to create and combine by the ancient works he read.

The possibilities here are limited only by your imagination, but I will suggest a few that I used with success. One early idea is to have students create a map; this works particularly well with *The Hobbit*. Tolkien's maps are frequent reference points in my class, and we quickly learn that they reveal a lot more than locations and place names. I often bring in a large, two-panel map of Middle-Earth to show the students where the story has brought us. Ask students to develop a map of an imaginary place with both physical and political features; have them explain how their map reveals

something about the (invented) culture that produced it (in the map of the Dwarves at the beginning of *The Hobbit*, for example, the top of the map is east, not north).

If you are particularly brave, you might have students develop the rudimentary elements of a language. Tolkien created fourteen languages in *The Lord of the Rings*; he knew or had a working knowledge of almost twenty real languages, including Latin, Greek, and modern and medieval Welsh (Noel 3). Creating a language is remarkably common (poll your students on how many have or had a “special” or secret language with a classmate or sibling growing up). I ask students for some basics—an alphabet and pronunciation, simple inflections (plurals and present tense verbs), and a basic lexicon of about thirty-five words. Students then explain where on their maps this language is spoken. At the end of the year I give them the option to develop this language as a final project, and even to translate some of Tolkien’s writing into their own language.

Combining their language and their maps, students can then create their own fantasy story. I first review with them W. H. Auden’s six elements of a quest adventure: “1) a precious object, 2) a heroic seeker, 3) a long journey, 4) fierce guardians, 5) tests that screen out the unfit, and 6) supernatural helpers” (*Reader*). Then I task them with creating a short story featuring these elements, scaffolded by mini-lessons in basic character development and plot structure (Freytag’s Pyramid). For support, I put them in small groups that are given time in every class to share and test ideas; in honor of Tolkien’s own group of such writers (which included C. S. Lewis), I call these their “Inkling” groups.

Finally, another creative option is to have the students write a review of *The Lord of the Rings*, with the hook being that it must be a *contemporary* review. I tell them Dwight

Eisenhower is president, the Korean War has just concluded, and Ernest Hemingway has just won the Nobel Prize for literature. How does this book fit in that world? Indeed, Tolkien's reception was (and continues to be) mixed. For context, I first ask students to read W. H. Auden's glowing review of *The Return of the King* from 1956 in which he remarks, "Mr. Tolkien has succeeded more completely than any previous writer in this genre in using the traditional properties of the Quest, the heroic journey, the Numinous Object, the conflict between Good and Evil while at the same time satisfying our sense of historical and social reality." This we contrast with literary critic Edmund Wilson, who in the sarcastically titled "Oo, Those Awful Orcs!" engages Auden's argument and makes the assertion that *The Lord of the Rings* is "long-winded [...] balderdash," its popularity explained only by people who "have a lifelong appetite for juvenile trash." This serves as a solid introduction to criticism of Tolkien's work, which, Shippey claims, divides "between generally-educated and professionally-educated." "It appears," he writes, "that people have to be educated *out* of a taste for Tolkien, rather than into it" (xxv). Despite my abiding love for Middle-Earth, my approach to teaching him is a warts-and-all examination in which students reflect on opinions from multiple perspectives in order better to inform their own.

Suggested Resources

For this article (and for the design of my course) I am indebted to many sources. Since the release of *The Lord of the Rings* films in 2001–2003, there has been a rapidly growing body of books about Tolkien and his work. Many are good; some are not. The Tolkien "brand" is so hot that Tolkien himself has published two books in the last two years, despite being dead since 1973: *The Fall of Arthur* (2013) an unfinished

piece of alliterative verse about King Arthur, and a translation of *Beowulf* (2014).

For the teacher interested in designing a course or unit on Tolkien, I would suggest the following. Douglas A. Anderson's annotated edition of *The Hobbit* (1988, 2002) is an essential tool for teaching that book and particularly useful for how it contrasts editions (the strikingly different ending to the riddle game of Bilbo and Gollum in the first and second editions, for example). A similarly useful text is Wayne G. Hammond's and Christina Scull's *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion* (2005), which consists exclusively of annotations on the text. Those who are especially interested in the evolution of the text of *The Lord of the Rings* should pick up Christopher Tolkien's comprehensive (though sometimes difficult to digest) multivolume *The History of the Lord of the Rings* (1988–1992). For those interested in understanding and doing more with the languages of Tolkien, Ruth S. Noel's *The Languages of Tolkien's Middle-Earth* (1974) is indispensable. Finally, Houghton-Mifflin's *Reader and Educator Guide to "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings"* (2012) is one of the finest teacher's guides I've encountered.

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Dr. Adam Kotlarczyk teaches English and is the Operational Coordinator for the English Department at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (IMSA), where he teaches courses on American, English, and world literatures. He recently designed and taught the course "J. R. R. Tolkien: Language and Literature." He has a wide range of research interests, including myth, nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, and the literature of war. Kotlarczyk also writes fiction; his publications include the collection of short stories, Front Matter. He has a PhD in American literature.